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ABSTRACT

Researchers explored ways institutions in the post-16 education sector in England and Wales can formulate recruitment and admissions policies that encourage students to stay in college. Data were drawn from the following sources: seminars attended by representatives of the post-16 sector; analysis of the findings of 86 Further Education Funding Council inspection reports; findings of the 3-year Raising Quality and Achievement Programme; and 171 institutions' responses to a survey examining pre-entry guidance and admissions. The study confirmed that greater recognition of the importance of correct course placement, intensive local competition for students, and a desire to widen participation in the sector have led post-16 institutions to review their recruitment and selection processes. The following were among the study recommendations for improving recruitment and selection processes: (1) develop symbiotic relationships with schools; (2) establish and maintain pre-entry relationships with applicants and other pupils through a range of "keeping warm" activities; (3) improve applicants' understanding of their future program of study and what will be expected of them; (4) review entry criteria and ensure that staff apply minimum criteria consistently; (5) ensure greater impartiality in recruitment; (6) improve initial assessment of applicants; and (7) identify "at risk" students at the pre-entry or entry stage. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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learning and skills development agency

LSDA reports

First impressions count

How effective recruitment and admissions can encourage students to stay at college

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Summary

Colleges have been reviewing their recruitment and selection processes in the light of:

- a greater recognition of the part played by correct course placement in improving retention and achievement
- intensive local competition for students
- the desire to widen participation and attract new learners into the sector.

In response, institutions have sought to:

- develop symbiotic relationships with schools, which offer opportunities for market research and more effective processing and monitoring of applications
- establish and maintain pre-entry relationships with applicants and other pupils through a range of 'keeping warm' activities, and in some cases using current students as ambassadors for the institution
- improve applicants' understanding of what their programme of study will be like and what they will be expected to contribute to ensure they achieve, for example through the provision of taster sessions
- review entry criteria, particularly for programmes with low levels of retention and achievement, and ensure staff apply minimum criteria consistently
- review and enhance admissions processes to:
  - ensure greater impartiality in recruitment (eg through joint interviewing, second interviews or increased screening of applications by careers or student support specialists)
  - improve the initial assessment of applicants, particularly in relation to key skills, but also to assure both parties of the applicant's suitability for the programme selected and to identify any support required
  - produce greater consistency in interviewing (eg by selecting and training a team of interviewers, using guidelines and increased monitoring of the process)
- identify 'at risk' students at the pre-entry or entry stage, to be able to put adequate support in place early enough to make a difference
- use new technology to:
  - create a more 'user-friendly' process for applicants
  - track applications
  - manipulate data to inform future planning (eg to analyse data on conversion rates from application to enrolment).

Introduction

This publication focuses on the ways in which institutions in the post-16 education sector in England and Wales:

- liaise and work with their partner schools
- build and sustain relationships with pupils, both while they are still within initial education and during the application process
- recruit and select applicants.

It is aimed at staff in institutions within the post-16 sector involved in the recruitment and selection of students:

- academic staff involved in admissions and schools liaison work
- student services staff
- staff in marketing functions and others with relevant cross-college responsibilities, such as schools liaison assessment or screening.

This booklet brings together some of the evidence from research undertaken in the past few years to identify the causes of non-achievement and withdrawal. This research underlines the importance of ensuring that the recruitment, selection and induction processes result in students joining the right programme and developing a sense of belonging to the college community at an early stage.

The right programme should be one that is relevant to the applicant's career and personal goals and appropriate for their ability. *9000 voices* (Martinez, Munday 1998) reported that: 'Students on the wrong course are more likely to drop out and appropriate selection to courses by central admissions or specialist staff is of crucial importance to retention.' Feedback from students indicated that they are also more likely to drop out if they find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course.

Withdrawn students were less likely than current students to agree that:

- *it was easy to make friends quickly with other students on their course*
- *their tutor helped them settle in very quickly.*

Martinez, Munday 1998

Building relationships with feeder schools, their pupils and parents offers the opportunity to produce a better match between applicant and programme. This may be particularly necessary for young people who come from families with no experience of post-16 learning; for disaffected pupils whose experience of initial education has not been positive – and whose opportunities may be limited; and for those whose initial programme choices may be unrealistic. The relatively high withdrawal rates experienced by colleges between application and enrolment have also indicated to colleges that they need to keep in touch with applicants and support them better in confirming, or reviewing, initial choices.

This booklet draws on the following sources:

- seminars held by FEDA in 2000, at which representatives from the sector were invited to share their practice in the delivery of student support
- an analysis of findings from 86 Further Education Funding Council inspection reports (from the second inspection round), to identify aspects of information, advice and guidance provision that were commended, and those that were indicated as weaknesses. These included 42 reports where inspection of student support was graded 1, and 44 reports where it was graded 3 or below
- development work undertaken by the sector during the last 3 years within the Learning and Skills Development Agency's (LSDA's) Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme, financed through the Further Education Standards Fund (England). Currently, about 160 case studies, written up for the RQA website by the colleges involved, can be viewed and downloaded at: www.rqa.org.uk
- a survey of pre-entry guidance and admissions, undertaken in 2001 by LSDA on behalf of college representatives in the Student Guidance Network – referred to in this booklet as 'the LSDA survey' – to inform development work that they were undertaking. Responses were received from 171 institutions in the sector.

Credit is due to staff in colleges who have shared the findings and the learning from their development work and innovations so openly with the rest of the sector, particularly through the seminars and the case studies on the RQA website.

Throughout this publication, the term 'parents' should be taken to include guardians.

The context: changes impacting on recruitment, selection and admissions

Local competition for students

Since 1993, when colleges were incorporated, increased local competition for students among institutions has, in some cases, undermined the principle of impartiality in the information and advice given. It has also sometimes led to limited student access to the range of information on post 16 options. *Tackling targets* (FEU 1994) concluded that: '...school leavers are not fully aware of what courses are available at college and are usually not prepared to find out'.

The difficulty of accessing Year 11 pupils in 11–18 schools to advise on college options was a recurrent theme among college staff contributing to the FEDA seminars held in 2000. This reinforces the importance of the 'honest broker' role that has been played by the careers services. There is concern that impartiality may be undermined by the introduction of Connexions, if personal advisers are managed by headteachers. (For information on Connexions, see Connexions Service National Unit / DfES 2002.) One college reported that some schools do not allow their pupils to attend its three annual open days; another observed that schools were sending Year 10, rather than Year 11, pupils to local careers fairs.

Where colleges are denied access to local schools – most likely by institutions with sixth forms – they are more reliant on other channels for ensuring that potential applicants are informed about the programmes they offer. The careers services were seen to have an important role in this respect: booklets setting out options at 16+ are often produced by careers companies and circulated to home addresses. The Education Act of 1997 places an obligation on schools to ensure that their pupils are given access to information on the options available to them.

Colleges therefore need to pursue proactive marketing strategies to reach potential students and their parents. Colleges are increasingly focusing on building long-term symbiotic relationships with feeder schools and their students.

A changing learner profile

Expansion to meet the government's growth targets, and the implementation of widening participation strategies, have led to a changing learner profile in recent years. Links are being made with schools and local education authorities to enable disaffected school pupils to pursue more vocational programmes in colleges from the age of 14.

Retention and achievement

Increased attention is being paid in the sector to improving retention and achievement rates, fostered by:

- the recurrent funding methodology
- the requirement to set targets at programme level for retention and achievement
- extensive development work in the sector, promoted through LSDA's RQA Programme, which has resulted in over 160 case studies now being available on the RQA website: www.rqa.org.uk

Pre-enrolment student preparation and relationship-building

Working in partnership with schools

Many colleges have been actively developing pre-enrolment relationships with feeder or partner schools. Sixth form and tertiary colleges, seen as offering natural progression routes at 16+ in their catchment area, have a significant advantage. Their approaches to schools are more likely to be successful. Colleges need to consider the benefits they can offer partner schools, before making an approach.

Key factors for success are:

- customisation of activities for the school
- establishing good relationships with senior staff and the headteacher
- the college offering a *tangible benefit* to the school (eg joint projects using college facilities).

In colleges achieving grade 1 for student support, the FEFC Inspectorate frequently commended extensive and strong links with schools.

*At **Richmond upon Thames College**, there is a liaison officer for each of the eight borough schools and two special schools. A college roadshow visits each school that will allow access, plus those outside the borough with sixth forms. Taster sessions are offered to borough schools: pupils come to the college at the end of June to attend a 30 minute talk and choose subject-specific classes to attend.*

Adequate resourcing requires senior management support. Increasing predictability in recruitment through market research into demand and the chance to monitor applications are seen by colleges as significant incentives to develop partnerships, even though this is time-consuming. Typically, such approaches would encompass some or all of the following:

- a nominated member of staff to liaise between the two institutions
- invitations from both parties for staff to attend events at each institution (eg prize-giving, plays)
- special priority and allocation of time for pupils and parents to visit the post-16 institution
- some curriculum-related activity
- briefing schools staff on relevant innovations or initiatives (eg Curriculum 2000) or on the criteria and procedures for admission, or the facilities offered
- the joint monitoring of applications – college staff may discuss the applications from pupils at the school with the head of year to ensure that college interviewers can advise the young person appropriately
- the opportunity for college staff to visit partner schools to increase awareness among pupils and staff of the provision offered, for example through:
  - taster sessions
  - open evenings
  - parents' evenings
  - roadshows for Year 11 pupils, which are fun as well as informative
- college staff contributing more broadly to careers education and decision-making activities in schools
- the involvement of school pupils in college activities (eg at one college, pupils were encouraged to help edit the college newsletter during the last two weeks of the summer term).

Increasingly, arrangements are being formalised through written agreements. At one college, annual targets were set for applications and enrolments from each school.

Worthing Sixth Form College *(WSFC) enjoys a wide catchment area, but competes with a number of other colleges and schools with sixth forms. It has around 1250 full-time and 250 part-time adult enrolments in day and evening provision.*

The college has a well-developed strategy for partner school liaison, which includes:

- *allocation of a senior manager or director to each of the five partner high schools and special schools*
- *partner school action plans, which focus on curriculum development and widening participation and are reviewed termly*
- *analysis of recruitment on course, broken down by subject and pupil*
- *research with pupils in Years 9 and 10 into their career aspirations and perceptions of WSFC, highlighting potential high demand in particular subject areas*
- *development of a range of curriculum links and exchanges, such as joint fieldwork, WSFC staff covering staffing shortages at schools, training in the teaching of GNVQs*
- *tailor-made taster programmes offered to Year 11 pupils in schools, allowing them to experience the college and its curriculum*
- *pre-open day briefings, a dedicated time for pupils and staff to visit during open days, and the opportunity for pupils to return in the evening with their parents.*

There is also close liaison between school and college staff in the monitoring of applications and joint interviewing.

The provision of taster sessions was very frequently commended by the FEFC inspectorate in colleges which received a grade 1 for student support.

*At **Telford College of Arts and Technology**, concerns over the quality of initial information and advice given to school pupils gave rise to the adoption in 1995 of a more systematic approach to schools liaison and the appointment of six admissions tutors from the existing staff.*

The admissions tutors were specialists within the college. They were given 250 hours' remission to: establish relationships with feeder schools; introduce a common approach to interviewing; and provide a taster programme. The admissions tutors were selected on the basis of their 'people skills', and were trained in interviewing skills. The subsequent increase in liaison activities and requests from the feeder schools resulted in the remission being increased to 400 hours by 1998.

The taster programme worked particularly well: this provided two or three 20-minute vocational tasters for pupils. Tutors are encouraged to view these as a positive way of presenting course information.

An admissions tutor for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is now in post, working with all partner schools and the three special schools. The combination within one post of the role of learning support coordinator with that of admissions tutor has greatly facilitated transition and led to an increase in applications from these students.

Building pre-enrolment relations

Pre-enrolment activities – 'keeping students warm' – are acquiring greater significance. This results from a recognition of the value of building and maintaining relationships with students prior to their arrival at the institution. Institutions may do this through regular written communication following application, sometimes through newsletters or magazines.

Building pre-enrolment relations also offers the opportunity to:

- deliver information to applicants at an appropriate time and in 'bite-size' chunks (eg confirmation of course offers; information on joining and induction; information on course requirements; suggested reading; information about the enrichment programme or college societies)

- demonstrate that the college cares about applicants as individuals (eg by sending them birthday cards, good luck or congratulations cards)
- provide chances for extra guidance or decision-making sessions for any applicants who are unsure about their programme choice (eg through second interviews or discussion of the programmes offered by a vocational area)
- identify those who have over-performed or under-performed in their examinations and invite these pupils to a post-GCSE advice service, thereby increasing the likelihood of correct course placement – and increasing retention and achievement. In particular, students (and their parents) may need to be encouraged to look at a wider range of options than GCSE resits.

Increasingly, colleges are following up on potential students between enquiry and enrolment and are adopting a personalised approach. Contacting those who do not attend interviews or return acceptance forms can alert staff to both practical problems (eg a change of address) and a lack of certainty or commitment on the part of the applicant. This can prevent applicants being lost unnecessarily, ensuring that they are picked up quickly enough to discuss other options.

*At **Gateway College,** a 'welcome pack' is sent out to those who have been accepted onto programmes. The pack includes:*

- *a letter giving clear details of the date, time, room and contact for when students first arrive*
- *the documents necessary to apply for Access funds; this is returned by students prior to entry, so that it can be processed before they arrive at the college.*

Of the 171 colleges that responded to the LSDA survey:

- 52% were sending 'good luck' cards for examinations
- 72% were inviting applicants to course preview days
- 85% were sending out information about what to do when applicants received their exam results.

Such contact can also be used as a motivational tool and to encourage students to turn up at the college for the start of the programme, particularly if they are making multiple applications. Students could also be invited to 'fun events' (eg summer activity days, fashion shows, a freshers' party, new student days or evenings). Publicity about the more interesting aspects of the programme, such as trips away, could be sent out in advance. Applicants may also be enrolled as associate students.

***Milton Keynes College** provides education and training to about 2000 full-time and 8000 part-time students. It faces fierce competition from local schools with sixth forms. Pre-enrolment relationship-building activities have been developed since the late 1990s. Students who do not attend interviews or return their offer letters are personally contacted by telephone. All Year 11 students who apply to take a course at the college are sent a 'good luck' card just before the start of their GCSEs.*

Relationship-building has been greatly improved by the introduction of customer services advisers, who, after extensive training and support from curriculum staff, interview applicants. However, their role is about far more than just interviewing. Their job is to build relationships with prospective students and their families. Evening appointments are offered every week to make it easier for parents or guardians to attend. Information is sent to the student on a monthly basis, including details of study support or college services such as hair and beauty salons. Most importantly, the customer services advisers act as a personal contact.

Taster sessions are offered to prospective students. These have been extended in recent years and are becoming a far more robust part of the admissions process.

A call centre has been established within the college where staff contact applicants within 3 days of receipt of their exam results. The aim is to telephone all prospective students to stop them worrying. Where necessary, students are reassured and offered guidance in looking at other options. They are invited to come to an advisory session to discuss their situation.

Elements of the induction process may be delivered in the summer through 'welcome sessions' or similar events. One institution surveyed was running a pre-entry 'induction course', which enabled applicants to select activities to 'taste', familiarise themselves with the college site, meet their personal tutor and attend an individual guidance interview.

Attending activity days, taster events, open evenings and roadshows allows applicants and their parents to familiarise themselves with the college and to make friends. This eases the transition, and begins the important process of 'settling in' and developing a commitment to the institution.

Students as ambassadors

Opportunities to talk to existing students can provide a valuable insight for prospective students of what it is like to study on the course and at the college to which they have applied. Our survey found that 65% of colleges already offer such opportunities.

National Audit Office 2001

Colleges are increasingly recognising the value of using their current students as ambassadors for the institution in their liaison work with schools and in 'keeping warm' activities. College students can contribute to such activities by, for example:

- featuring in 'success' posters sent to their former schools
- talking about their college experience to pupils and parents at associate student evenings
- taking a roadshow into their former school
- working in schools with pupils at Key stage 4.

Sir John Deane College *lost 41 students from its 1998 intake during the autumn term. Many returned to their previous schools. A group of students and tutors – the 'Bridging the gap' group – was established to investigate why students were leaving.*

Focus groups consisting of tutors and students discussed elements of pre-entry provision, including the links with partner schools and induction process. They concluded that:

- *prospective students like to 'hear it' from students*
- *students need to be 'drip-fed' information – not too much at once.*

As a result, a number of innovations were introduced in 1999:

- *a 'welcome pack' was prepared for each course of study and distributed to those applying for entry. The packs are written for students by students and include, for example, a student perspective on what happens in the first 3 days at college*
- *college staff took current students back to their former schools to tell pupils about student life, which created a much more informal atmosphere*
- *peer mentors have been recruited from among the student population. They assist tutors to deliver the induction process and staff the 'welcome desk' at enrolment at partner schools, greeting pupils on arrival and, then, as the pupils leave, giving them a 'welcome pack' – hence providing the first and last point of contact for pupils.*

There was greater interest in mentoring and a better response from girls in the college.

The involvement of students in these processes has been particularly useful for new staff, who themselves may not yet know much about the college. Evaluation of the impact of the changes has been through staff and mentor feedback and analysis of retention data.

Working with disengaged pupils

As part of their schools liaison activities, some colleges are working with schools and local education authorities to provide a vocational curriculum for disengaged pupils aged between 14 and 16 and no longer attending their schools.

Skelmersdale College *is a medium-sized FE college in an area with relatively high unemployment and single parenthood. The college offers a range of linked provision, paid for by schools, whereby pupils undertake part of their schooling in the college (240 in 1999/2000). This has been developed over several years and includes a Year 11 alternative funded by Lancashire County Council.*

The schools liaison function, previously the responsibility of curriculum managers, has been reorganised into a central unit serving the whole institution. Any leads from inspection reports, local press, etc. are followed up proactively. The college is piloting service-level agreements with two schools, which provide details of provision and agreed responsibilities; but these are proving time-consuming to monitor.

The unit uses logging sheets to track requests for assistance from schools, and can identify levels of participation from different departments. Details of events are available to staff through a shared drive on the college computer network. A consistent approach to charging is now taken, and funding is processed centrally through a separate cost centre.

***Swansea College** delivers a 14–16 curriculum for disengaged pupils, some of whom have been removed from schools.*

Pupils attend the college from between 2 hours to 3 days per week, accessing a vocational programme, usually an NVQ. Numbers have increased fivefold in the last 3 years. In 1998/9, 65% achieved NVQ units; 80% of these pupils progressed to college provision, usually at foundation level but sometimes at intermediate level.

In November 2001, following the White Paper *Schools: achieving success* (DfES 2001), the government announced a major new national initiative to develop partnerships between schools, colleges and training providers. This should enable 40,000 14–16 year olds to access work-related learning placements to be set up by colleges and training providers within the next 2 years.

Entry requirements

A study in 1995 by FEDA into GNVQ entry criteria reported difficulties experienced by college staff in placing students on appropriate programme levels, particularly at intermediate level. Colleges that have looked at student profiles when investigating poor achievement have found that applicants are being accepted onto programmes even though they do not meet the agreed entry criteria.

Entry criteria emerged as a focus when teams were setting targets for achievement with students, and it became clear that if GCSE grades on entry were used as a predictor, then many students could only be targeted for pass grades and some would do well to achieve [GNVQ Intermediate].

Tamworth and Litchfield College 2000

Institutions have been investigating the links between poor retention and achievement and student profiles for some years (Martinez 1997). They have responded by:

- reviewing entry requirements to ensure that these are reasonable and informed by the achievement of previous cohorts
- rigorously enforcing minimum criteria
- developing alternative provision, usually at foundation level.

***The City of Bath College** has implemented a number of strategies over the past 5 years in response to high levels of drop-out from a number of courses.*

Some students appeared to have selected inappropriate programmes for want of a better alternative. Retention on the GCSE resit programme was poor, as elsewhere in the sector.

The college developed a broader range of Intermediate GNVQ and foundation-level provision to provide greater choice. It also introduced a college-wide timetable grid to enable students to mix and match across the curriculum – GNVQs with A-levels or GCSEs.

Applicants without the required entry standard may be accepted in exceptional circumstances, but as the result of a planned process, rather than on an ad hoc basis. Such students may be: deemed 'at risk'; offered additional support; and subject to regular monitoring and target-setting.

A course team does have the discretion to allow exceptional entries, and in this case the student has a negotiated action plan, agreed with the personal tutor and shared with the course team.

Tamworth and Litchfield College 2000

Staff teaching the National Diploma in Sports Studies at ***South Nottingham College*** *introduced tighter restrictions on entry for the 2000/01 cohort. Applicants were made fully aware of the need to meet the necessary entry requirements at their interview. A few who did not fully meet the requirements were admitted, but signed contracts stating that their progress on the programme could be closely monitored and that they could be rerouted if the programme was too demanding for them.*

Similarly, a tighter focus on initial screening was introduced for the National Diploma in Computer Studies, to ensure that students had a minimum of grade C in GCSE Mathematics: they were subject to a logic aptitude test. Significant improvements were made in retention and achievement on the programme.

'The major cause for the improvement in retention and achievement figures can be attributed to stringent marketing and initial guidance policies, mainly that the students all have GCSE Maths and English at grade C or above.'

Such strategies also reflect a cultural change in the sector towards institutions:

- recognising the benefits to all of 'recruiting with integrity'
- accepting greater responsibility for student achievement
- acknowledging that action that will make a difference can be implemented.

Much more clearly now the stated objective is that the intending student should be advised and guided towards appropriate choices, rather than simply recruited for its own sake.

City of Bath College

Admissions

Aspects of interview and selection processes most frequently commended by the FEFC Inspectorate were that:

- interviews were held for all students or all full-time students
- second interviews were offered, for example after results were known
- there were thorough systems and procedures
- the staff attended INSET training days and were given guidelines
- the arrangements were monitored and revised
- the students were satisfied.

Of colleges in the LSDA survey, 92% had a cross-college admissions policy, 76% had a central admissions centre and 10% had admissions centres on each site.

At ***Kendal College****, applications from those interested in full-time programmes are handled by centralised admissions. Applicants are offered a guidance session with curriculum staff: the focus is on exploration of programme areas rather than selection of courses. The emphasis is on allowing for a 'fresh start' – only relevant data is passed on to tutors.*

All enquiries and enrolments for both full- and part-time programmes are logged in a centralised management information system, which enables a 'keep warm' approach to be taken. Admissions data can be analysed by age, programme, etc. Data on numbers and type of application is regularly compiled and comparisons are made with target numbers and data for the same point in the previous year. Senior management are updated on the situation weekly and the marketing strategy is amended accordingly.

Different approaches to admissions are in place in the sector, involving a variety of staff:

- reception staff may field initial enquiries and refer on to curriculum departments
- a guidance or admissions team may deal with initial enquiries and/or process applications as part of a central student/client services centre or information centre

- separate admissions centres may operate for different groups of applicants (eg 16–19, adults, commercial training, international students)
- in smaller institutions, the function may be handled by an admissions secretary or clerk or by a director of admissions who liaises with course admissions staff.

*At **Wigston College**, applications are handled centrally by a high-profile student services department, located in the college's foyer. Guidance given to applicants is client-centred: it may cover a range of options, including those offered outside the college. Detailed admissions reports are made available to faculties, including data relating to applications by age and school.*

In colleges where recruitment is devolved to centres, admissions data may still be held at a central location. Similarly, while applications may be processed centrally, interviews and offers may be handled locally by faculties or course teams to give applicants personal contact with staff in programme areas at an early stage.

There are likely to be different admissions procedures for:

- partner and non-partner schools
- applicants for full-time and part-time programmes (eg applications for full-time programmes being processed centrally and those for part-time courses being dealt with at main centres or sites)
- applicants with disabilities: one college reported that its admissions panel reviews the outcomes of interviews for all residential and non residential students with disabilities
- applicants for commercial training.

In sixth form colleges, applications from adults are likely to be processed separately by an adult studies department.

***Sir John Deane College** has 1200 students and offers A-level and GNVQ Advanced programmes. There are separate systems for those applying from its partner and non-partner schools. Over 60% of the intake come from the five partner schools, and admissions interviews are held at these schools. Senior tutors and the principal visit to publicise the college and its programmes. Applicants are interviewed twice, although in some cases the second interview is a mere formality. A leaflet is produced to inform parents about the institution and what it offers.*

Innovations in the sector have been focusing on:

- centralising admissions processes
- smaller teams of staff conducting placement interviews
- more extensive staff training, stressing that staff are interviewing on behalf of the whole college and need to take an impartial view
- the screening of application forms by admissions or student / client services staff and referral for an in-depth guidance interview where there is a mismatch between career goals or anticipated achievement and the programme of study chosen
- the introduction of second interviews or group interviews
- earlier assessment of additional learning support needs – and improved screening and assessment tools
- more consistent referral to student / client services or senior tutors when admissions or academic staff interviewing applicants identify inappropriate choices
- the tracking of applications through initial contact and admissions interviews to enrolment, and the collection and analysis of conversion data (applications into enrolments)
- the computerisation of admissions and enrolment systems.

*At **Bracknell and Wokingham College**, an information system is used to identify trends in demand for programmes, application patterns and conversion rates of applications into enrolments. Students are tracked through the system: from receipt of application, through interview, acceptance of offer, enrolment and achievement. Student services monitor the flow of applications from schools, which enables the college to respond to changes. As a result of the tracking undertaken, the institution has introduced earlier interviews and offers.*

*At **Tamworth and Litchfield College**, group interviews with vocational tutors were introduced to supplement one-to-one interviews. Parents are also invited to attend.*

Admissions interviews

LSDA survey results indicate that applicants to full-time programmes are significantly more likely to be required to attend admissions interviews than those applying for part-time courses:

- 92% of institutions in the survey require all 16–19 applicants to full-time programmes to attend for interview
- 86% require all adult applicants to full-time programmes to attend for interview
- 33% require all part-time 16–19 applicants to attend for interview
- 13% require all part-time adult applicants to attend for interview.

Admissions staff coordinate or manage the admissions process. Admissions interviews are likely to be conducted by more senior guidance and teaching staff, including heads of department, threshold / student services managers, and admissions, curriculum or senior tutors. Eighty-two per cent of colleges in the LSDA survey reported that teaching staff managed admissions interviews to place students on programmes. The reluctance on the part of schools to release their pupils to attend interviews has led to these being held outside term time and in the evening, when parents might also be available.

Academic staff may conduct joint interviews with guidance staff or learning support staff. Where there is a central interviewing team, recommendations for placement may be passed to the teaching team for final approval.

Inspectors commended the identification of additional learning support needs at interviews.

*At **Gateway College**, the learning support team is involved in unobtrusive 'double' interviewing (with a member of the guidance team and curriculum area) during admissions. This includes administering a short assessment, the results of which are input onto a database for future reference.*

Enhancing the quality of the admissions interview

Most colleges are taking action to ensure that admissions interviews are carried out consistently. This is most likely to be through briefing staff and requiring them to use standard documentation and formats for interviews. Admissions handbooks or interviewers' handbooks, checklists or guidelines are available to ensure that interviewers cover all the necessary points. Information packs for interviewers might include:

- a list of suggested questions
- detailed course leaflets and entry criteria
- details of financial support
- reporting forms.

Candidates may be required to sign to indicate that they have received all the necessary information. One college, where guidance staff and tutors interviewed jointly, indicated that it used a double-sided form, which was completed and signed by guidance staff on one side and by tutors on the other. Students are required to sign each side on completion of each process.

Interviewers may be required to follow a standard format or standard procedures and are likely to be required to complete interview record forms. These may be signed by the interviewer and / or candidate, and a sample may be reviewed or monitored. Admissions staff and tutors or senior managers may check interview forms and offer letters before these are sent out and before the details are entered onto the database.

Colleges have also put in place selection procedures for interviewers, thereby restricting the number of staff involved and training those selected more intensively.

*At **Richmond upon Thames College**, interviewers from the course teams are selected by the head of department and obliged to attend fairly extensive training, including developing interviewing skills. Interviews are conducted at the college, where reception facilities and the waiting areas are welcoming. Staff have a course manual and interview pack, with a checklist on the topics to cover as appropriate (eg ease of travel, overseas student status, suitability for programme area). To minimise disruption, interview weeks are agreed with the borough schools.*

Colleges are also ensuring consistency in admissions interviews by:

- observing interviews (sometimes using peer observation)
- working to agreed quality standards; one institution also had its own college-wide code of practice
- staff briefing and training; one college was considering whether its staff should be accredited through the Open College Network
- administering post-interview student questionnaires; these are analysed and areas of student dissatisfaction are followed up
- investigating retention and achievement rates: a high withdrawal rate in the early stages of a programme may indicate inadequacies in the admissions process
- senior staff / curriculum department reviews.

We have a pre-course counselling group, which consists of team leaders from curriculum areas, guidance adviser, and training team leader, chaired by the Curriculum Manager, Student Support. This group looks at everything from course information leaflets, through the pre-entry interview – and training for staff to carry out interviews.

LSDA survey

While many colleges are implementing such actions, a number acknowledged that they need to do more work in this area.

Supporting documentation and processes

One way of ensuring the 'best match' between a student and a course is to provide admissions staff with as much information as possible about the student at interview stage.

Leicester College

The documents that candidates are required to submit to demonstrate their ability and interest in their chosen programme will vary according to the level and nature of the course. Many community education services offer open entry to the majority of their classes. In such cases, evidence of ability may only be required for a minority of accredited courses.

References, school reports and records of achievement

Three-quarters of colleges in the LSDA survey take references and records of achievement into account in the admissions process.

Practice on the use of references is variable:

- some colleges use references to identify students 'at risk'
- others do not request references, as part of their commitment to the concept of a 'fresh start'
- sometimes references cannot be obtained anyway, because schools do not prepare them
- institutions may ask for two references, one is a character reference from somebody who knows the student outside school
- references may be considered particularly important for programmes where staff need to be assured of the good character of applicants, and may be requested prior to interview (eg childcare or social work). Police checks will also be undertaken where students work directly with young people or children.

School reports, including those from headteachers, were deemed by some colleges in the survey to be more useful than references. The following are also being used to assess candidates:

- portfolio of work (eg for art and design courses)
- auditions
- pieces of written work (eg for Access programmes)
- medical, therapeutic, psychological or other specialist reports, if required (eg for applicants with disabilities or learning difficulties)
- personal statements (eg for HE courses)
- evidence of interest through voluntary work or work experience
- compact certificates (local arrangements which allow pupils in schools to progress to further or higher education on successful completion of certain requirements).

For mature applicants, greater emphasis may be placed on previous experience, practical work (in appropriate areas), enthusiasm and commitment.

Initial assessment and screening

All respondents to the LSDA survey were asking for evidence of attainment through qualifications achieved. Fewer than half indicated that they were administering screening tests as part of recruitment / admissions processes.

If a candidate has no evidence of qualifications and no references, they may be screened to identify any language support or additional learning support required.

The lack of systematic, college-wide basic skills and learning support screening was frequently criticised by FEFC inspectors in the Round 2 inspections. In some colleges all students may be required to complete diagnostic assessments. The advent of Key Skills in Curriculum 2000 has given greater prominence to assessment issues. Colleges have introduced screening for Key Skills during admissions or induction, although this is often perceived by applicants to be a negative experience.

Aptitude or subject-specific tests may be administered at pre-entry or entry to confirm programme choice and / or identify additional learning needs.

South Nottingham College *introduced subject specific diagnostic assessments into their GCE A level provision in 1999, as part of their strategy to improve achievement. These assessments were used in the first 3 weeks of term by all subjects, in addition to the basic skills assessments: 17 students were referred to workshops, and a further nine were counselled and redirected to more appropriate provision.*

At ***The College of North East London****, one retention strategy adopted in 1999 was to require departments to devise appropriate initial assessments to ensure that students were correctly placed. Some departments did this by ensuring that a member of the course team interviewed every prospective student and set a diagnostic test. This helped to judge suitability more effectively.*

In some cases an offer to study at the institution, rather than a final decision as to a specific course, may be made at the admissions interview. The actual programme is decided at enrolment, after exam results are available. Institutions may also wait until enrolment or induction to screen candidates, on the basis that applicants may decide to pursue other options elsewhere.

Written information given to students at interviews is most likely to cover the course content, length of course, and minimum entry requirements. It is less likely to include information on mode of study, assessment, costs, financial assistance, opportunities for progression, or the awarding body. Only 70% of colleges in the LSDA survey were giving information on the times when students are required to attend the college, although research into retention and achievement has highlighted the need for some students to know enough about their timetable to be able to plan part-time work around this. Only 28% of colleges were giving data on the destinations of previous students. For many students, much of this information is pertinent to their final decision. It needs to be made available to them at an appropriate point during the admissions process.

Computerisation of application and enrolment processes

Traditionally there has been a tendency for colleges to ask applicants for the same information several times during the admissions and enrolment processes. Applicants have to endure endless form-filling, which can be a frustrating and time-consuming experience. Computerisation provides the opportunity to streamline these processes. It offers a more user-friendly approach, requiring applicants to give their details only once. The information can even be used for subsequent enrolments, if (with the student's permission and in compliance with the data protection legislation) their details are kept on file. Back-up paper-based systems may need to be available in case of computer systems failure.

Godalming College *has developed computerised systems for the collection and interrogation of student data, especially during enrolment.*

After an initial interview, the offer is always for a place at the college, rather than for a particular programme. Programme choices are finally agreed at enrolment. Enrolment takes place over 3 days, with groups of 10 students at a time meeting their tutor and discussing subject options. Result sheets are completed and input into the networked computers using optical mark readers. So, when the students are interviewed, the enrolment team has on-screen access to data on the:

- *initial application form*
- *GCSE results and the average GCSE score*
- *probable final grade at Level 3 for each subject discussed.*

The amount of information available, and its currency, means that enrolment interviews can be focused and wise choices can be made, based on accurate predictions.

A course is agreed with the student, and checked on the computer to see if it fits into the timetable. Any additional learning support needs are also indicated on the screen, so that the student can be referred appropriately. Students then sign on with a curriculum manager, which provides another check and allows the student to be referred back to the enrolment team if necessary. Careers service staff and college careers specialists are available to assist.

Early identification of students 'at risk'

The changing profile of the student population has encouraged institutions to focus on strategies targeting students deemed to be 'at risk' of early withdrawal and non-achievement. This may lead to a formalisation of existing practices to identify and support weaker students. Some staff may express reluctance to take this approach on the basis that this process might stigmatise students and deny them a 'fresh start'. However, early identification enables additional support and closer monitoring to be put in place at the beginning of the programme, and may prevent problems arising later.

By October 2000, 70 students were judged to be 'causes for concern' for a variety of reasons, including known difficulties with learning, behaviour, health and family reasons. Much of this information had been obtained at the admissions and entry guidance stage during induction.

New College, Telford

School references can provide a valuable source of information for identifying applicants 'at risk'. However, the extent to which schools are prepared to pass on personal data about their pupils appears variable. Recent legislation, including the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Human Rights Act 2000, may be discouraging schools from doing so. Building close relationships with feeder schools may allow information to be disclosed, but the requirements of the data protection legislation will need to be observed.

*At **Telford College of Arts and Technology**, transition support to students 'at risk' was introduced in 1998/9 through a mentoring process. 'At risk' pupils are identified with teachers in schools and through interviewing by admissions tutors. Once on the programme, they are tracked by admissions tutors liaising with tutors. The increased contact between admissions tutors and 'at risk' students during transition provides a valuable source of intelligence, particularly during the first half term.*

Early identification of 'at risk' students allows for discussion of the relevant issues during the application process with students (and, where appropriate, parents), and the setting of individual targets (eg for attendance) as part of acceptance onto the programme.

*At **Godalming College**, research into the reasons for drop-out led to agreed 'at risk' categories of students. New procedures then needed to be put in place for these students at enrolment, and for subsequent monitoring. During the admissions process, there had already been some identification of students who needed more support and closer scrutiny. These were given a 'soft offer' at the first interview, with conditions imposed that were then lifted at the end of the first half term if progress was satisfactory.*

However, applicants themselves may be reluctant to reveal personal information during the application process, where they perceive that this might damage their chances of acceptance.

The process of identifying 'at risk' students at interview stage was less successful. Despite two attempts at adapting an 'at risk' questionnaire, students appeared to be unhappy about disclosing such information while they were in the process of being interviewed for a place on a course. The final version distributed by course tutors in the classroom has been very successful and has identified a number of 'at risk' students who have been offered support specific to their individual needs.

Leicester College 2001

Part-time students

Part-time students often do not have access to a personal tutor once on-programme. Therefore early identification of 'at risk' students during admissions – and in time for differentiated approaches such as increased monitoring and target-setting to be put in place – may allow for the appropriate, prompt intervention that makes the difference. Not only may these learners have less opportunity to discuss factors affecting their performance in the classroom, but they may also be undertaking their studies on community sites without central services support or in the evening, when such facilities may be closed.

Key points

Colleges have been introducing innovations to their selection, recruitment and admissions processes, as a response to feedback from inspection and an analysis of research findings on retention and achievement.

Research indicates that early withdrawal from programmes may be linked to weaknesses in pre-entry processes. The provision of more comprehensive information to applicants, and opportunities to benefit from impartial guidance should lead to more accurate course placement. A number of actions are being undertaken to ensure a more consistent approach to interviewing and to improve monitoring. However, more work may be needed to meet the concerns raised by inspectors.

While experiencing difficulties in reaching pupils in some schools, colleges are nonetheless developing effective forms of collaboration. This enables them to build relationships and offer a range of pre-entry activities, increasing opportunities to confirm or alter initial choices, and build motivation and commitment to the institution.

Colleges reviewing their pre-entry provision may wish to:

- collect feedback on the admissions process from all parties, including applicants and parents (where appropriate), and act on the results
- provide adequate opportunities (eg through 'keeping warm activities' and taster sessions) for applicants and (where appropriate) their parents to reach realistic appreciation of what a programme involves, the demands it is going to make on them, likely destinations and outcomes, and their own suitability for it
- have a mechanism for ensuring that applicants are able to get to know the college before enrolment and develop a sense of belonging
- undertake adequate initial assessment to ensure that applicants are placed on the right programme and given any additional support they need early enough to prevent withdrawal.

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raising quality
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First impressions count

How can colleges attract and retain post-16 students in the face of intensive local competition? Recent research shows that first impressions really do count – experience of the college and its staff during selection, recruitment, admission and induction can make the difference between a student staying on or dropping out, between success or failure.

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